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MATT GROENING
ON SIMPSONS COMICS & TV

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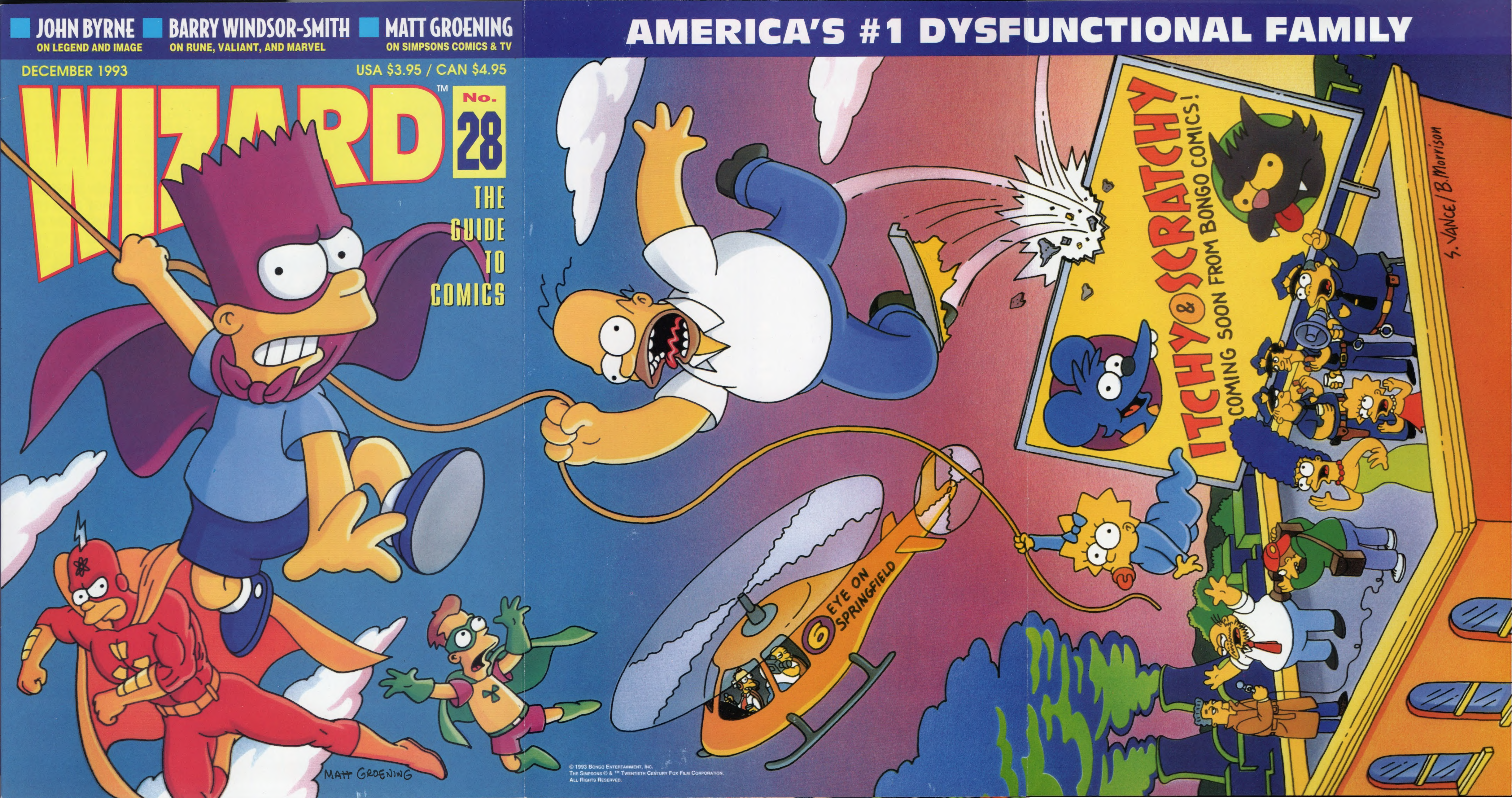

AMERICA'S #1 DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

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MATT GROENING

EYE ON SPRINGFIELD

ITCHY & SCRATCHY

COMING SOON FROM BONGO COMICS!

S. VANCE / B. Morrison

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AYE CARUMBA!

Matt Groening and the Bongo Comics crew launch Springfield's most famous residents into a new line of Simpsons comics.

By Michael Berry

There's little doubt who rules Twentieth Century Fox these days.

As soon as you turn into the lot from Century City's Pico Boulevard, the first thing that hits your eye is their billboard, positioned prominently to one side of the guard shack. There they are, in all their jaundiced glory: the cartoon residents of Springfield, U.S.A. Their bug-eyed, yellow-skinned, chinless greeting lets you know that you're about to enter the birthplace of America's favorite animated family, the Simpsons.

The drab exterior of the building that houses their creator's office, however, gives no indication that anything special happens within. It isn't until you reach Matt Groening's sanctum sanctorum that the full enormity of the Simpsons' assault on popular culture smacks you in the face. The office contains a prosaic desk, a drawing table, and a comfy couch, but most of the rest of its space is devoted to Simpsons paraphernalia, both licensed and bootlegged, both slickly manufactured and hopelessly amateurish.

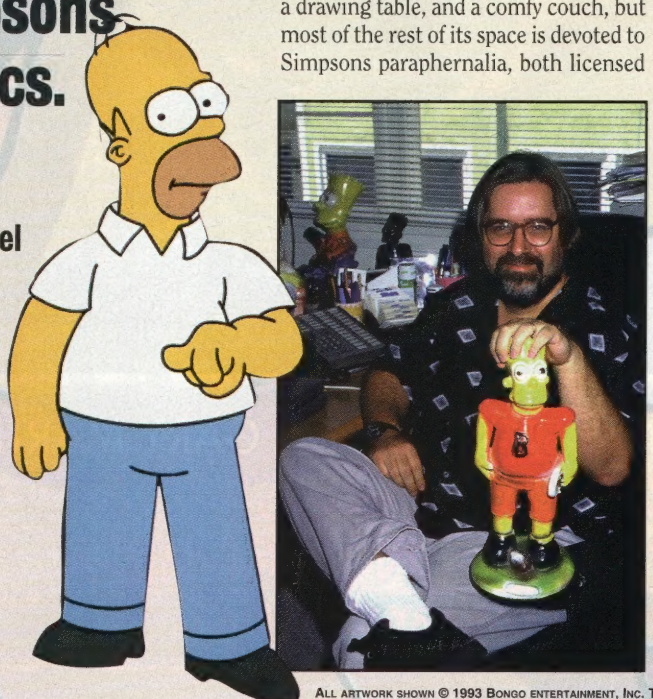
There's a Simpsons pinball machine. A bottle of scary-looking pink Bart Simpson soda pop from Indonesia. A display of the new book, *Bart Simpson's Guide to Life*. Hideous, canary-yellow Homer and Bart plaster statues fresh from the streets of Tijuana. Near-lifesize, homemade felt hand puppets of Homer and Marge, guaranteed to send any two-year-old into paroxysms of fear.

Framed magazines featuring Springfield's first family on their covers hang on the walls. Sure, there are the expected issues of *Newsweek*, *Spy*, and *People*. But the really cool stuff comes from periodicals like the *National Employment Review* ("Is the Nuclear Industry 'Pulling a Homer?'"), *7 á Paris* ("Avez-Vous La Simpsonite?"), and Japan's *WowWow* (your guess is as good as mine).

In the midst of this monument to merchandising at its finest, it takes you a moment to realize that there's something missing. Something you'd think would be an obvious spinoff from one of the most popular animated television shows of all time.

Shouldn't there be a *Simpsons* comic book around here someplace?

Funny you should ask. By the time Thanksgiving rolls around, the newly-created Bongo Comics Group will have released its first titles. Not only are Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie finally getting an ongoing comic to call their own, but so are those fur-covered TV terrorists Itchy and Scratchy, as well as superheroes Bartman and Radioac-



Left to right: Homer Simpson, Father of the Year; Matt Groening with friend; the cover to *Bartman* #1.

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tive Man. During its first year, the fledgling company plans to publish a total of 18 issues of various titles.

Compared to the weekly output of industry giants like Marvel and DC, that may sound like extremely small pork chops. But when you consider that Bongo Comics is basically comprised of only four people, folks already busy handling other aspects of the growing Simpsons empire, its start-slow strategy becomes much more understandable.

The quartet of major Bongo players includes *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening, creative directors Steve and Cindy Vance, and art director Bill Morrison. The informal nature of their collaboration blurs the division of labor a bit, but a few generalizations can be made. From a small office in Santa Monica, once a recording studio for Bob Dylan, the Vances co-plot the stories, with Steve handling the layouts and Cindy later acting as colorist. Morrison usually provides the finished art, sometimes with assistance from other members of the *Simpsons* art stable. As publisher, Groening oversees it all, throwing in his own humorous ideas and making sure the finished product represents the same vision as the television series.

Groening and Steve Vance are comics fans from way back. Steve goes so far as to state, "Comic books really changed my life." (Cindy Vance somewhat sheepishly admits that comics never particularly interested her until fairly recently. It was Dave Sim's *Cerebus* that got her reading again.)

Steve Vance loved to draw as a kid, and read comics occasionally, but not fanatically. "But when I was about 12," he says, "somebody gave me a stack of Marvel comics, and suddenly my interest in drawing clicked into place. It was like, 'Oh, that's why I've been practicing since I could pick up a crayon.' I just immediately became a fanatical collector."

Groening's experience is somewhat similar. "I was as obsessed with comics as any other normal little suburban freak growing up in the '50s and early '60s," he says. "But I was lucky, because I had a very hip older brother who turned me on to the good stuff."

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"I was as obsessed with comics as any other normal little suburban freak growing up in the '50s and early '60s."
—Groening on comics as a kid.

Mark Groening had a secret club that met in the loft of a garage. Too little to climb up the ladder and walk across a beam into the loft, young Matt had to wait until he was six or seven before he got the nerve to go up there himself.

"I found these incredible piles of great comics. The EC horror and science-fiction titles. *Mad, Uncle Scrooge. Little Lulu*. Looking back on it now, I see how these kids had incredible taste."

Groening and his friends eventually established their own clubhouse, which was located through a hole in the concrete foundation of a neighbor's house. Groening says, "We took all the comics out of the loft and moved them into this cave and read them with flashlights—until someone saw us going in and out of the hole in the wall and cemented it up. Our comics are entombed!" Groening laughs. "But I'm thinking I should go back with a jackhammer..."

Some parents discourage their kids' obsession with drawing comics, but Groening's dad, a cartoonist who did single-panel gags, understood his son's compulsion. "I grew up surrounded by comic books and cartoon anthologies," Groening says. "We received every general-interest magazine in the country, because my father also did advertising. So I grew up reading *Punch*, the *New Yorker*, and *Esquire*, and I was really taken by such cartoonists as Ronald Searle, Rowland Emmett, and a bunch of others. My father gave me drawing supplies, showed me a few tricks, and I've been drawing ever since."

During those early days, Groening concentrated mainly on rendering monsters, war scenes, and endless variations of Batman, but he also experimented with

Steve and Cindy Vance.

some original characters. He says, "I created a character named Melvin, who was the precursor of Bart. And yes, Melvin was also secretly SuperMelvin, who was basically the same character with a cape." Years later, in Hollywood, Groening tried to do a Saturday morning TV show called *Melvin's Inferno*. Unlike SuperMelvin, it didn't fly.

After a while, the adolescent Groening found his attention captured by other pursuits. "As I grew older and discovered rock 'n' roll and girls, comics didn't seem quite so enticing anymore. Besides, girls really weren't impressed by comic books, nor were they impressed by me drawing comic books. They were something some girls would tolerate, but they weren't a good way to get a date. In fact, I think that's part of why cartoonists draw, because they couldn't get dates in high school."

Groening never completely put the drawing pen away. In 1977, he created *Life in Hell*, the weekly strip that skewers modern culture and introduced its irascible rabbits—Binky, Sheba, and, of course, one-eared Bongo—to a mildly bewildered reading public. Such compilations as *Love is Hell*, *Work is Hell*, and *Akbar & Jeff's Guide to Life* injected a welcome dose of skepticism in the Reagan '80s, and found a wide, appreciative audience.

It was while working as an editor for the *L.A. Reader*, an alternative newspaper, that Groening met graphic artist Steve Vance, freshly arrived in town in 1980. After looking at Vance's portfolio and seeing how comics art had influenced his commercial illustration, Groening and Vance struck up a friendship.

In 1987, Groening produced his first 30-second Simpsons spot for Fox Broadcasting's *The Tracey Ullman Show*. Those early bits were pretty rough around the edges, but Groening says he was always confident that his characters had the potential to carry their own prime-time, half-hour show.

"I knew that if we could get our vision on the air, it would be a huge success. I was afraid only of two things. First, that it would be watered down before it got on the air. Second, that adults wouldn't give it a chance. I knew kids would tune in, because they are desperate for good cartoons on TV."

Groening's fears proved to be unfounded. When *The Simpsons* premiered as a series on January 14, 1990, it immediately became a national phenomenon, attracting viewers from a phenomenally wide range of ages and professions. Within weeks, it seemed like you couldn't walk out of the house without seeing someone in a Bart Simpson "Underachiever and Proud of It" T-shirt.

Amid the deluge of Simpsons merchandising came a quarterly magazine, *Simpsons Illustrated*, largely produced by Bill Morrison and the Vances. It was here that the idea of doing a full-line of comic books first sprouted. The magazine occasionally ran comic stories, and the response was overwhelmingly positive.

"We found that readers just loved the comics we put in it," Groening says. "So we tried an experiment. We did *Simpsons Comics and Stories* #1, and just put it out there to see what the reaction would be. People liked it so much that we realized that we had lots we could say with comics."

"I think that our approach will be similar to that of the show in that not everybody is going to get every joke."
—Steve Vance discusses the new books.

Wouldn't it have been easier simply to license the characters to another comics company?

Groening answers, "We were pursued by every major company, [all of them asking us] to allow them to do their version of a Simpsons comic. I just didn't want to. The point is to have fun and do really good stuff. We could have sold out for the quick buck, but we decided to do it ourselves. It's a lot harder, but we have more control. And in the long run, it's really going to be a fun ride for us as creators and for dedicated readers.

"Starting a brand-new comic book company is hard to pull off, but we have these characters that people really love, and we can say new things about them by utilizing the medium of comics. We're not coming in, taking a licensed property, and just exploiting it."

Groening says that he sees *The Simpsons* as alternative television, and that he'd like to think that the wares of the Bongo Comics Group will also be an alternative, to standard comics fare. "We're trying to carve out a niche in the market with basically humorous material. There's so much 'grim superhero' stuff out there."

Weekly television and comics, however, are two very different media, and their rules and expectations are sometimes incompatible. Will the new comics differ significantly from the show?

Steve Vance says, "Only in that we know we will have an audience more knowledgeable about comics than the audience of the TV show. I think that our approach will be similar to that of the show in that not everybody is going to get every joke. I mean, Matt has admitted that the writers and animators stick in jokes that even he doesn't get."

Groening agrees. "What we try to do on the TV show is reward people for paying attention. Most television is pretty thin gruel. If you pay attention, you get annoyed, because there's nothing much going on. With *The Simpsons*, though, if you pay attention, there are extra jokes in there. Subtle jokes that you may not get unless you've read a lot of books or have a wide range of cultural references.

"I like to think of the show as a kind of delayed-reaction time-bomb, so that years from now, when kids watch it in reruns as adults, they'll go, 'Oh my God! There's a whole other level of jokes I didn't get back in the old days.' We're going to try to do an equivalent amount of detail and subtlety in the comic book."

The Bongo team will also strive for a similar subtlety in the characterizations. In Steve Vance's opinion, the main reason the television series works is that, despite the slapstick, satire, and bright primary colors, there's a strong sense of reality at work.

"I feel like there's a spirit to the show that people can really relate to in their everyday lives. There are absurd things happening on the show that have never happened to a human being, but on a smaller level, the level of interpersonal relationships, I think it's really realistic.

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I think people appreciate that."

The Vances are confident they can translate that same sensibility to the comic. "We've worked with Matt for quite a long time," says Cindy. "After you've worked for him for many years, you get better at guessing which way he would go with something. Generally, we're right."

Steve says, "Matt has the advantage of knowing the characters from the inside out. They're his characters, and if anybody knows how to be true to them, he's the one. Obviously, that's an incredible advantage we have over any situation where the characters are licensed to some other company, which just starts cranking them out."

Groening says he sees himself as "the tinkerer." He says that "people come up with great artwork and I say, 'Can we try this?' If a story is really well fleshed-out, I'll go in and add those little details that aren't part of the story: funny store names, secondary characters, stuff like that."

Groening says that, above all, his objective is to maintain good storytelling. "That's what I see as most neglected in comic books. There's some fantastic artwork out there, but a lot of the stories are

pretty flat. I don't think we're going to get that kind of devotion to the comic based on the art, although we're going to try some interesting things with it. But it's still going to be people with big eyeballs and tragic overbites."

Those "interesting things" Groening is planning for the artwork will include tributes to the comics of yesteryear. Steve Vance says, "When we were just beginning to organize the company, talking about what we were going to do, Bill Morrison did some sketches spoofing great moments in comic book history. One of the things he did was a parody of the cover of *Fantastic Four* #1, with Homer as the giant creature coming up from under the street. We got a big laugh out of that. Cindy and I looked at each other and said, 'There's a story here!' So we sat down and plotted 'The Amazing Colossal Homer.'

"We figure that there's going to be something in the comic for everyone," says Vance. "If you like the show, you'll enjoy the comics. If you like the show and are a comics fan, you'll get even more from them."

On the television series, little effort is made to maintain an internally consistent chronology. When Bart slips Homer an exploding beer can as an April Fool's Day prank in one episode and subsequently destroys the house, you can bet everything will be back to normal the following week, with no further mention of the incident. As any continuity-obsessed fanboy will tell you at length, however, comics lend themselves to complex serial storytelling.

"The nature of network television is that people have to end up where they were at the beginning of the show," Groening says. "In the comics, we're going to have consistent continuity. Again, because people are reading it month after month, we're going to reward them for paying attention and have an overall story."

Just don't expect any monumental cliffhangers. Vance explains, "At the moment, our most frequent publication is bimonthly. And I really hate the idea of making people wait 60 days to catch up with the story. But we are going to have plot threads that run from issue to issue."

The creators are laying the groundwork for two or three large stories planned for later next year. Vance refuses to give away any details, but hints, "One thing that attracted me to Marvel's books was that soap opera aspect to them."

Groening also seems to enjoy comic book melodrama. "Is Aunt May still alive?" he asks. "She was hanging on by a thread when I stopped reading."

Just as some comic readers have a certain fondness for Peter Parker's aged relative, there are those *Simpsons* viewers who want to know a little bit more about the personal lives of Principal Skinner, Krusty the Clown, Ned Flanders, or Moe the bartender. On TV, and in comics, a one-shot appearance can sometimes lead to greater things for a minor character.

Groening says, "There are secondary characters I didn't particularly care for who I now feel are alive and whom I want to take care of. When bad things happen to them, I feel horrible, even though part of the fun is causing them great pain and humiliation.

"I'm very attached to the Simpson family and everybody in it, but I'm also concerned about characters like Otto the bus driver and Barney the barfly. With Barney, I wanted to take the sitcom hero's sidekick, who is generally the lovable fool—Barney Rubble, Ed Norton—and make him really pathetic and disgusting. But even Barney's lovable."

Groening also confesses to a real fondness for Hindu retail clerk Apu. "In every episode, you get more of a clue of what he's really like. We have a show coming up next season in which Homer and Apu make a journey back to India to the Kwik E Mart home office. It's a very funny episode."

Simpsons Comics will very definitely explore the lives of these and other secondary characters. Each issue contains a 22-page main story that focuses on the Simpson clan, while six-page back-up features give the creators room to write about cast members who couldn't necessarily carry their own book.

Fully illustrated back covers will give readers an idea of what those never-to-be-published spinoff titles might have been. One such title will be *Patty and Selma's Ill-Fated Romance Comics,* featuring Marge's lovely sisters.

Groening says, somewhat proudly, that he thought of a new comic title on the way to the interview: "*Otto the Bus Driver's Crashpad Comics*. What that will be, I don't know."

Part of the fun of watching *The Simpsons* is keeping an ear tuned for celebrity guest voices. Everyone from Sting to Liz

Taylor to Aerosmith to Tom Jones has taken a turn at the mike. The list of guests for the upcoming television season includes Michelle Pfeiffer, Ernest Borgnine, George Harrison, and James Taylor. The Ramones, of punk rock fame, will provide entertainment at Mr. Burns' birthday party. ("Ah! These minstrels will soothe my jangled nerves.")

Will caricatures of famous faces be making their way into the comics? Groening shrugs and says, "It's possible, but we don't have any plans for it. It's fun for celebrities to do *The Simpsons*. It's one day's work. They don't have to memorize any lines, don't have to dress up. They have a real good time. I don't know if there's that same kind of thrill when you're depicted in a comic book."

Traditionally, comics haven't done an exemplary job of depicting female characters or appealing to female readers. The folks at Bongo Comics Group therefore want to make sure that the male denizens of Springfield don't hog the spotlight. Marge, Lisa, and Maggie will continue to be prominent members of the cast.

Groening says, "We know viewers love Lisa Simpson, so we're going to try to explore her character in the comic. She's someone a lot of women feel passionately about. I've had people tell me that some of the shows about her brought tears to their eyes. Although we're not out to make people weep in the comic book, we're going to try to show real emotions. We'll keep the women characters alive."

The challenge is not to allow Bart's popularity to overwhelm the books. Cindy Vance says, "Undoubtedly, Bart will get a lot of attention. But that's one of the reasons why we're doing *Bartman*, so the Simpsons comic can highlight other characters in the main storyline."

Groening says that the semi-bimonthly *Bartman*, which debuts in December, will be about Bart's fantasy life and is "much wilder" than *Simpsons Comics*.

Steve Vance doesn't want to give away any surprises about the plot of the book, saying only that "the first issue deals with the world of comic book collecting, and the kind of speculative frenzy that we're seeing a lot of now." From his secret lair within a hollow tree, assisted by his faithful sidekick Houseboy (a.k.a. Milhouse), Bartman, the Avenger of Evil, finds himself up to the top of his nine-pointed head in criminal intrigue.

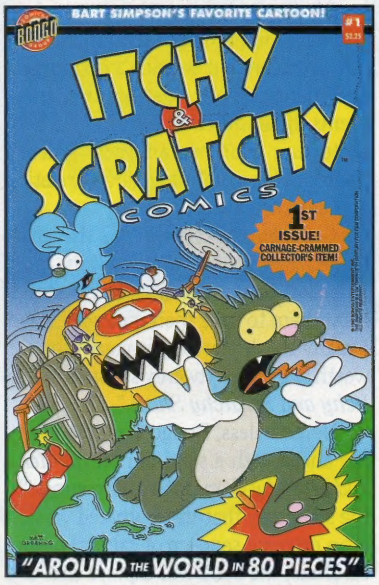
"I think you'll be surprised by what we can do with Itchy and Scratchy in the comic. There's going to be enough mindless violence to satisfy the die-hard fans, but there will be a little story there, too."
—Steve Vance

Groening says that one of the projects he's most excited about is the semi-bimonthly six-issue *Radioactive Man* mini-series, based on the comic book Bart reads on *The Simpsons*. (Groening chuckles and says, "Of course, the real 'radioactive man' is Homer.")

As the promotional literature promises, *Radioactive Man* "spans the Irradiated Crusader's entire career, from his plutonium-powered origin to his latest battle with Dr. Crab."

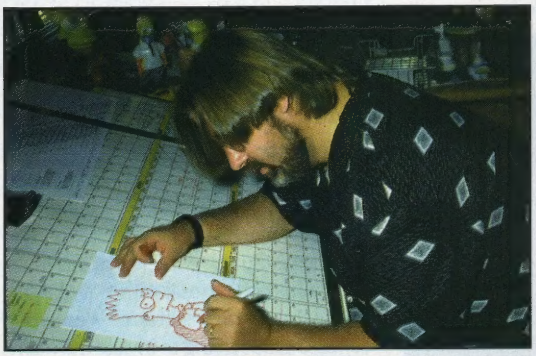
"We thought it would be fun to explore what that comic would really be like. Issue #1 is going to be from 1952. Each step of the way, we're going to feature artwork and story styles of a classic comic era: Golden Age, Silver Age, all the way up to the present."

The Radioactive Man universe is still under construction, but Groening says, "It is so much fun to take our favorite elements out of the comics we grew up with, and pay homage to, or parody, them. Anybody who knows the history of comics is going to be able to appreciate this stuff, but if you don't get the inside references, then it's still going to be a great comic."



You can't very well launch a new line of comics without a few marketing gimmicks, and while Bongo Comics isn't going the polybags-and-holocovers route, the first batch of books do contain some extra goodies. Each #1 issue has a jumbo pull-out poster, and the four pieces can be assembled to form your own "ultra-jumbo Bongo Universe mural."

Radioactive Man will get off to an extra-bright start. Steve Vance says, "We've



left to right: *Radioactive Man* #1; Homer, Matt, and Marge. Above, left: Matt sketches out a Bart; above, right: *Itchy & Scratchy* #1; right: an original conceptual sketch of the Simpsons.

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got a glow-in-the-dark cover for the first issue, because there's a joke in there, not just a marketing ploy. We're trying to price these books as low as we can to cover the cost of doing them. We're not raking in a lot of extra dough by doing special covers. The gimmicks are just something to add an extra level of humor."

It's easy to see the possibilities inherent in a superhero like *Radioactive Man*, but what can you do with a cartoon cat and mouse whose sole purpose in life seems to be inflicting horrendous bodily torture upon one another? Where's the room for insightful characterization and deep social commentary?

Groening acknowledges the challenge. "Everybody says they want more Itchy and Scratchy on the show, and they want them to have their own series. But I really think you do get your money's worth with ten to twenty seconds of *The Itchy and Scratchy Show*."

Nevertheless, Bongo Comics is forging ahead with a semi-bimonthly *Itchy and Scratchy Comics*. Says Groening, "In the same way that the animated version is an extreme send-up of cat and mouse cartoons, the book will explore that end of over-the-top violent humor, along with parodies of 'funny animal' comics."

Steve Vance says, "I think you'll be surprised by what we can do with Itchy and Scratchy in the comic. There's going to be enough mindless violence to satisfy the die-hard fans, but there will be a little story there, too. We're going to go into the world of Itchy and Scratchy beyond what you see on the TV show. In their universe, they're actors, and we'll see them on and off the job."

Groening and the Vances all see these initial offerings from Bongo Comics as only the beginning of a much larger enterprise. "These are only the most obvious things that we're doing," Groening says. "As we go along, if these titles work, we're going to branch out and try new things, new characters."

And Bongo Comics is by no means a closed shop. "We're open to submissions and outside involvement," says Groening. "Just don't call me at home."

And don't assume that, just because you can recite the dialogue from every episode, you necessarily have what it takes to put words in the Simpsons' mouths. Explains Cindy Vance, "We found with the magazine that it's a lot harder than people realize to write for *The Simpsons*. People think they can just write humor for any sort of sitcom. It doesn't work. There's a certain tone that people find hard to capture."

If all goes according to plan, Bongo Comics will eventually publish titles that have absolutely no connection to the Simpsons. "I personally can't imagine doing anything that doesn't have an element of humor in it," says Groening, "but I do have some science fiction projects, and a monster project. I also plan to expand the *Life in Hell* universe from its weekly strip into something more ambitious."

Speaking of *Life in Hell*, which gave Groening his start in the business, it has been forced to take a backseat to other, more pressing projects.

"The show and the comic book company take precedence over my own work," Groening says. "With that stuff, there's a group of people awaiting my input. The comic strip is just me, and I can always make a deal with my brain: 'Oh, I'll do this at midnight.' I have been doing *Life in Hell* at the last possible moment for about twelve and a half years out of the last 13 years. It definitely concentrates the pain into a short amount of time. If I do them ahead of time, I often go, 'Oh, I could do it better,' and I start it over again."

The focus of the strip has mutated over the years. Groening says, "I used to explore a lot of the dark side of childhood in *Life in Hell*, but I feel that material is well-covered in *The Simpsons*. So these days, I'm more interested in the traumas of adult relationships.

"*The Simpsons* is a very smart show about stupid people. *Life in Hell* is more about people who are too smart for their own good. I would love to animate *Life in Hell* and explore that further. *The Simpsons* may be a fluke. They may never let me go wild again, but if I can, the next thing will be wilder than *The Simpsons*."

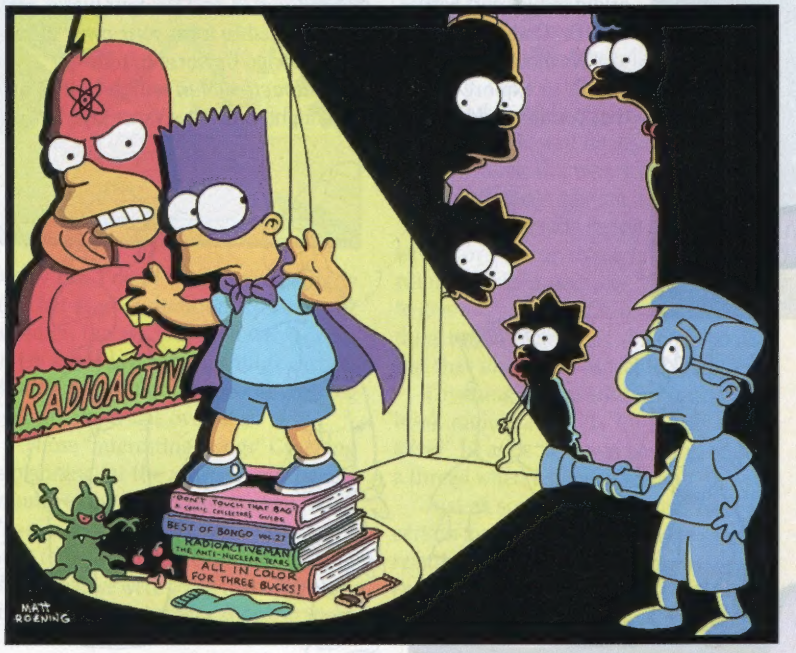
Wherever Groening goes from here, it's clear that he has already more than exceeded his expectations for his own cartooning talent. In the publisher's note in the first issue of *Simpsons Comics and Stories*, he writes, "Cartoonist? I figured I'd grow up to be a miserable grump pulling a cart in a tire warehouse, making insulting caricatures on the walls of the loading dock when the supervisor wasn't looking."

Now, the driving force behind one of the most popular animated series of all time, he says, "Years ago, when I was more of a struggling cartoonist, I used to sit at Astro Burger, which was this lousy local joint on Melrose, with Gary Panter and other young artists. We would scheme about trying to invade the mainstream, see how far we could get with our weird ideas. Gary went on to design *Pee-wee's Playhouse* and develop a fine arts career. I lucked out with *The Simpsons*."

Groening laughs. "It seemed to be more fun to bug a whole bunch of people instead of just your friends." ★

Michael Berry is a freelance writer based in Northern California.

Milhouse puts Bartman in the spotlight.



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